



It's Friday, January 3, 2020. In today's issue: a horse rescue on the icy Missouri River; new additions to the National Register; laser scanning Robber's Cave; mystery drones and airships; washing dirt (no, really!); and January events.

A horse emergency on the icy Missouri River



What was a valuable racehorse doing on the icy Missouri River in January 1882? Men from a local packinghouse mobilized, but could they save the horse before it was swept under the ice?

[Keep reading.](#)

Seven Nebraska Additions to the National Register of Historic Places



The National Park Service has approved seven Nebraska properties for listing on the National Register: Hartington's Downtown Historic District; Grand Island's 4th Street Commercial Historic

District; the Oshkosh water tower; the John C. Kesterson House in Fairbury; the Harry V. Temple House in Lexington; Camp Indianola; and Nebraska School for the Deaf. [Read more.](#)

History Nebraska is proud to oversee the National Register program in this state. We coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect these important sites. Want to learn about National Register sites near you? Check out our [interactive map](#).

Laser scanning Robber's Cave

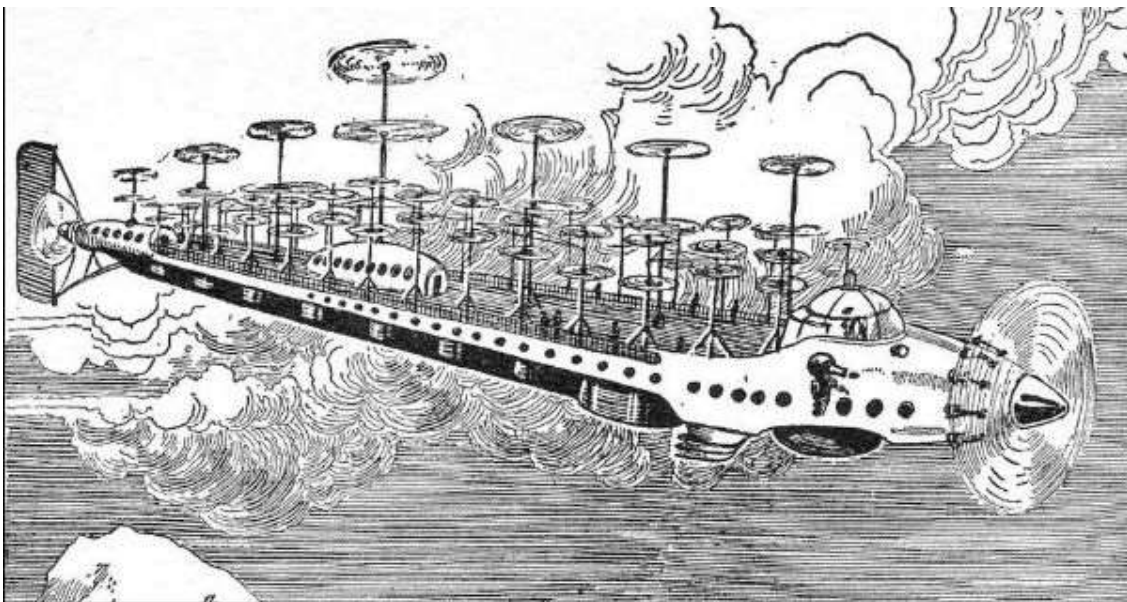


History Nebraska has funded a first-of-its-kind project to digitally map the engraved walls of Robber's Cave in Lincoln. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln team has produced a 3-D rendering of the cave's branching tunnels.

“As bits of Robber's Cave history fade to folklore, the thousands of engravings that crowd its Dakota sandstone walls like graffiti are likewise disintegrating, imperceptibly but inevitably, into miniature dunes at the base of the walls.

“These walls can talk—echoing more than a century of visits from those who have carved names and symbols and faces with finger or stick or knife—but some of the distant voices are nearing whispers.” [Keep reading.](#)

Have you seen the “mystery drones” over Nebraska? It happened in 1897 too.



Nebraskans and Coloradans have reported seeing the multicolored lights of fleets of drones in the night sky, says the [Lincoln Journal Star](#).

“At first sight it has the appearance of an immense star, but after a closer observation the powerful light shows by its color to be artificial... At 9:30 last Monday night the large glaring light was seen to circle around for a few minutes... It then stood perfectly still for about five minutes and then descended for about 200 feet, circling as it traveled at a most remarkable speed....”

But wait—that's not from the *Journal Star*! That's from an 1897 report from Hastings. That winter, night sightings of an electrically lit “mystery airship” started in Nebraska and spread across the country. A 1979 [Nebraska History article](#) has the story.

Why is this archeologist washing dirt?



What's the first thing that pops into your head when you think of archeology? Was it washing piles of dirt through a screen? If not, let us tell you about water screening. It's one of the messier

parts of discovering our history. [Keep reading.](#)

Want to learn more about how archeologists are discovering Nebraska's ancient past? Don't miss our ongoing Nebraska History Museum exhibit, "[Piecing Together the Past.](#)"



Now this looks more like an archeological excavation.

But it's not. It's part of the ongoing work to expand and renovate the visitor center at [Chimney Rock National Historic Site](#). The larger building will re-open with new exhibits later this year!

Popular on social media



- Among his other talents, Columbus's Walt Behlen was a master of the [publicity stunt](#).
 - Christmas is over, but it's never too late to enjoy [Fort Robinson sled dogs](#) pulling Santa's sleigh.
 - You'll recognize the Abraham Lincoln statue outside the state capitol, but [something is different](#) about this photo.
-



Upcoming events

Join us January 16 as we learn about two Nebraskans, Clara Bewick Colby and Rheta Childe Dorr, who became the nation's most important suffragist journalists. [Read more](#) about this and other January events.



History Nebraska Newsletter, written by David Bristow, Editor, and Josh Lottman. history.nebraska.gov
 Want to change how you receive these emails? You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).

Complete articles from History Nebraska blog:

A Horse Rescue on the Icy Missouri

<https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/horse-rescue-icy-missouri>



By David L. Bristow, Editor

How did a valuable pacer (a horse used in harness racing) nearly drown in the icy Missouri River in January 1882? The story tells us something about 19th century life in a river city.

The story begins on January 22, when Omaha businessman Clifton Mayne traveled to Council Bluffs on business. This wasn't as easy as it sounds. A railroad bridge spanned the Missouri River, but it wasn't open to wagon traffic. Mayne took the "dummy train," a train that went back and forth across the bridge.

But how would he get around Council Bluffs? He could walk or take the streetcar, but that wouldn't do for a wealthy man with a taste for fine horses. Mayne had some special cargo loaded on the train: a light buggy that he used only on special occasions, and his prized pacing horse, Oscar Phelps. This was the 1880s equivalent of bringing a Porsche.

Mayne's business took longer than expected and he missed the dummy train's westbound departure. No matter. He'd just cross the river on the ice, as people had been doing since before the bridge opened in 1872. The next day's *Omaha Daily Bee* tells what happened:

"When part way over, he observed some boys who were skating making violent signs at him and stopped to see what was wanted, when one of them came up and told him he was driving on dangerous ground. On getting out and examining the ice he found his horse's fore feet within six inches of a space where ice had been cut out and the new ice was so thin that the boy who warned him readily broke it through with his skate.

"Mr. Mayne then made a wide detour and had nearly reached the Nebraska shore when suddenly his horse broke through with his fore-feet. He got out and unhitching him pulled the buggy back and then took the horse by the bit and tried to get him on the solid ice. The animal, however, floundered about so that he broke the ice in all directions about him, letting himself and his owner down in the water. Mr. Mayne scrambled out, but the horse worked himself under the ice, all but his head, which rested on a cake of ice which alone prevented him from being drowned."

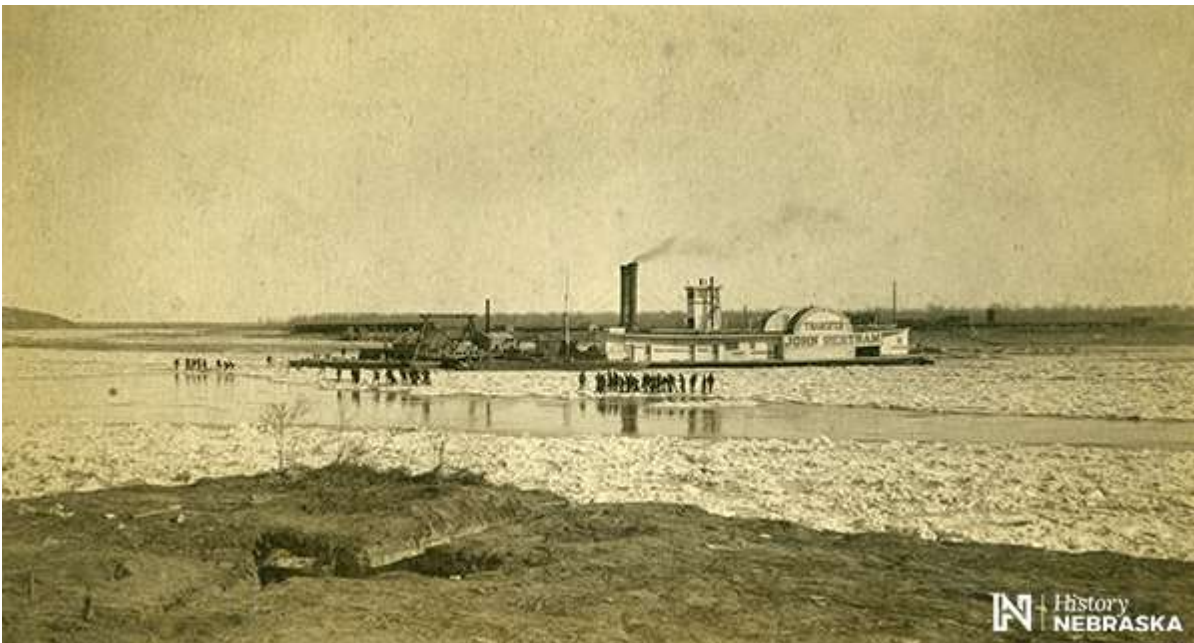


Photo: Travelers and workers often braved the icy Missouri River, just like these bridge workers near Rulo, Nebraska, in 1886. History Nebraska RG2457-5-24

Oscar Phelps was in serious trouble. His unusual name probably wasn't a good omen. He may have been named for a character in a syndicated 1880 short story in which a young man using the alias "Oscar Phelps" is killed in a duel by a disguised woman seeking revenge. Or he may have been named for the soon-to-be-defunct town of Oscar, in Phelps County, Nebraska. Either way, he was in danger of being pulled under the ice by the current.

Mayne ran for help. The nearest business was Boyd's Pork Packing House, Omaha's original meatpacking plant, north of present-day Lauritzen Gardens. Several plant workers came with planks and ropes. For the next two hours they struggled to rescue the horse while a crowd of some 500 onlookers gathered along the riverbank.

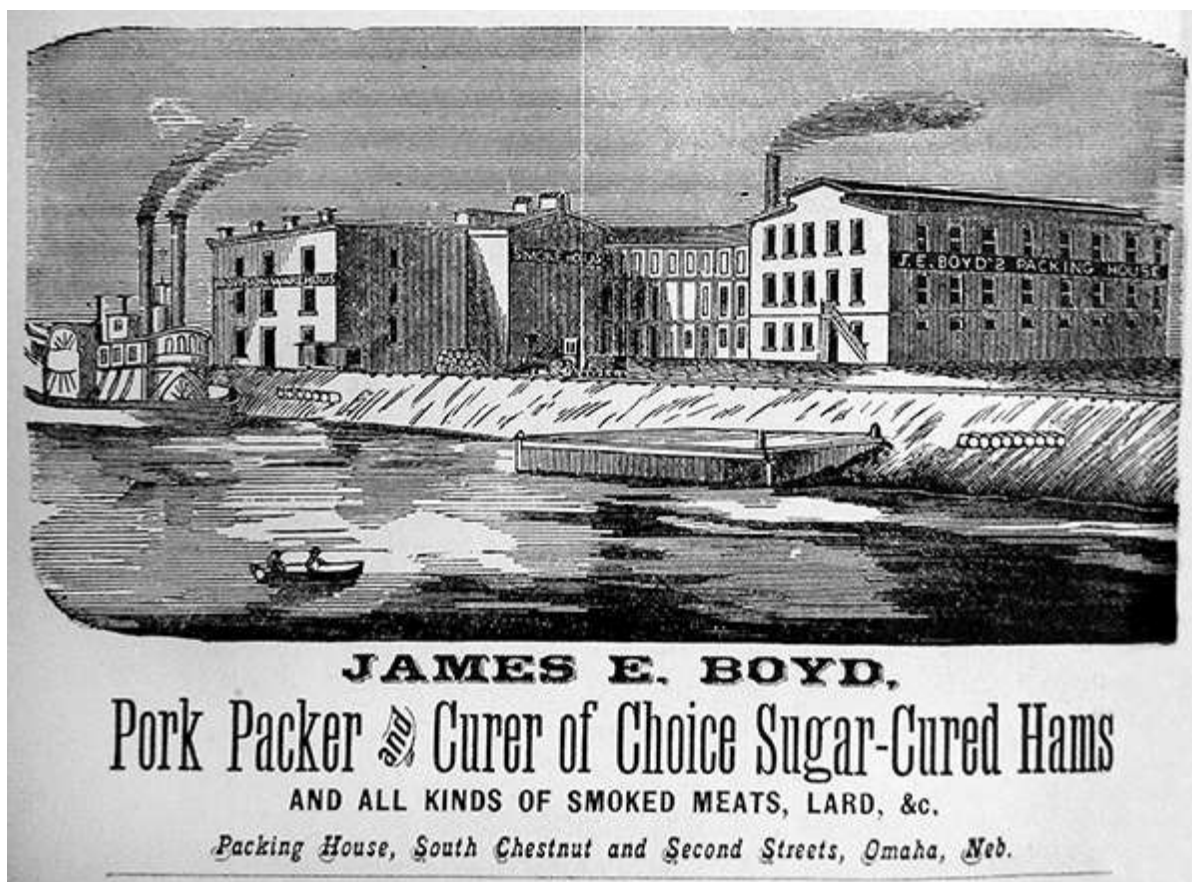


Image: Future Nebraska governor James Boyd opened Omaha's first meatpacking plant in 1872. From Alfred Sorenson, Early History of Omaha (1876), p. 242.

It was dangerous and unpleasant work. Oscar was floundering just below the spot where the plant discharged its untreated waste directly into the river. And the plant was no small operation, having slaughtered some 112,000 hogs during the previous year. Omahans were used to living in a smoky, smelly, and muddy city, but the *Bee* noted that the “work was done in the face of sickening filth and stench.”

Meanwhile, other drivers and teams of horses crossed the river that day, oblivious to the danger. It was how things had always been done. The *Bee* recommended waiting for another “cold snap.”

It was getting dark by the time Oscar was pulled from the cold and filthy water “in a half dead condition.” But the horse was tough as well as fast. He recovered and was later sold to Mayne’s business partner. The following year the *Bee* reported that Oscar Phelps was “winning some fast races and high honors at Ohio fairs this fall.” Running on the soft dirt of a track probably seemed easy after crossing rotten river ice.



Photo: This circa-1920 harness race in Neligh, Nebraska, was after Oscar Phelps' time, but shows the kind of racing he did. History Nebraska RG2836-1818

This article was first published in History Nebraska's "A Brief History" column in the January/February 2019 issue of [NEBRASKAland](#) magazine.

Sources:

"[Boyd's Pork Packing House](#)," in A.T. Andreas, *Andreas' History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882).

"Minor Mention," [Omaha Daily Bee, Oct. 6, 1883](#).

"Narrow Escape: A Horse Goes Through the Ice Below the Bridge," [Omaha Daily Bee, Jan. 23, 1882, p. 8](#).

"Oscar Phelps," syndicated short story: "The Mysterious Cadet," [Grant County \(SD\) Herald, Nov. 6, 1880](#).

Categories:

[Omaha](#), [Missouri River](#), [winter](#), [Horses](#)

Seven New Additions to the National Register of Historic Places

<https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/seven-new-additions-national-register-historic-places>

History Nebraska is pleased to announce that there have been seven new Nebraska locations listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**. Hartington's Downtown Historic District, Grand Island's 4th Street Commercial Historic District, the Oshkosh Water Tower, the John C. Kesterson House in Fairbury, the Harry V. Temple House in Lexington, Camp Indianola, and Nebraska School for the Deaf were all considered and selected by the National Parks Service for listing. Read more about each of the new additions below.

Hartington Downtown Historic District



For over a century, Downtown Hartington has been the commercial and entertainment hub of Cedar County. Buildings constructed as early as 1900 are still in use today, giving the area a distinct historic character. Downtown Hartington was listed because of its contribution to Nebraska History from 1900 to 1969, and because its buildings have retained their original look, feel, and integrity.

This designation opens up the possibility for the revitalization of this area. The Hartington Downtown Historic District is comprised of 30 contributing resources, all of which are now potentially eligible for federal and state historic tax credits.

David Calease from our **Historic Preservation Office** sees this designation as an incredible opportunity for Hartington. "There are some great historic resources in this district that have a ton of potential for historic rehabilitation," said Calease. "I think Hartington is a great example of a community that can better its future by embracing its past."

Grand Island's 4th Street Commercial Historic District



This seven-block district is centered along 4th Street from North Sycamore Street to North Cedar Street and is bound by the alley between 4th and 5th Streets to the north and by the Union Pacific Railroad tracks to the south. The buildings within the district reflect the various architectural styles common for commercial properties throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century.

The district contains 49 contributing resources that demonstrate Grand Island's commercial development from around 1895 to 1969. These resources are now potentially eligible for historic tax credits that can be applied to rehabilitation projects.

David Calease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#) sees great potential for the area. "The resources along 4th Street have a great history. This area was very busy with banks, a theater, hardware store, grocery stores. The historic resources that are there today are a testament to the story of the community."

Oshkosh Water Tower



Proudly standing 120-feet tall, the Oshkosh Water Tower has been an iconic landmark in Garden County since 1920. Like a lighthouse to the plains, its welcoming presence can be seen from miles away.

The tower is in excellent condition and is a classic example of a “tin-man” type elevated tower. These “tin-man” water towers were once standard across rural Nebraska communities, but are quickly disappearing as new technologies take hold. Even though the tower was retired as a water delivery system in 2018, the residents of Oshkosh banded together to save this landmark.

David Calease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#) feels that this listing highlights the diversity of historic places on the National Register. “What I really like about this nomination is that it shows the versatility of the National Register program – it’s not just big buildings and fancy houses – we have historic resources all across the state, in nearly every community.”

John C. Kesterson House



With a stately appearance and eye-catching burgundy exterior, the John C. Kesterson House has long been a treasure of the Fairbury community. Built by and named after a successful horse-breeder, freighter, and businessman, the John C. Kesterson House was built in 1879 with a wing added to the north in 1885. The home retains an exceptional degree of integrity with a minimal amount of alterations over the years. The home retains most of its historic materials, including all of its original windows and an ornate front porch. The home also features several unique details including cast-iron gargoyles and a hitching post.

David Calease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#) appreciates the care taken by it's owners to keep important historical details intact. "Anyone who thinks that old homes need their windows ripped out and the floor plan rearranged needs to look at the John C. Kesterson House. Very comfortable home with great historic features inside and out. Some updating – I think we all appreciate indoor plumbing – but by and large, this home is a great example of late-nineteenth-century architecture that has been well maintained over its 140 years."

Harry V. Temple House



Visitors to Lexington and its residents have long noticed the stunning three-story Queen Anne located just a half-mile northeast of downtown. The house is one of only a few Queen Anne homes still standing in Lexington. Despite years of minor renovations it still has the elements considered hallmarks of Queen Anne architecture: a steeply pitched roof, patterned shingles, asymmetrical form, and classic columns that support a wrap-around porch.

The house is named after Harry Vane Temple, a successful banker and early settler of Lexington (originally named Plum Creek). The bank he founded in 1881, now known as Temple's First National Bank, is still standing.

David Calease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#) was impressed by the house's condition. "This house looks great on the exterior, but what really sets it apart is the interior details and craftsmanship. A few things have changed in the home since it was completed in 1901, but the woodwork remains almost entirely intact. The kind of work you see in the Temple House's foyer, office, and dining areas are terrific examples of skilled craftsmen doing exceptional work that should be appreciated."

Camp Indianola



During World War II, the residents of Indianola, Nebraska had a much closer encounter with the enemy than the average American did on the home front. Between 1943 and 1946, Camp Indianola, located just 1.5 miles north of town, housed prisoners captured in North Africa, Italy, and mainland Europe.

Today all that remains of Camp Indianola are concrete building foundations, two brick chimneys, and the standing frame of a water tower--but these ruins display the standard layout of POW camps. Furthermore, of the four POW camps in Nebraska, the ruins of Camp Indianola represent the best surviving example.

This chapter in Nebraska's history is not well known. David Calsease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#) explains. "The history of POW camps in Nebraska during World War II is surprisingly unknown to many in the state. It is a really fascinating history that I think Nebraskans would really enjoy and take pride in if they knew more about it. When you talk to people in the Indianola-area about the POW camp there, you can tell how proud they are about the role it played in the war effort, but also how mutual respect was forged between groups of men who were supposed to be enemies."

Nebraska School for the Deaf



Throughout most of the twentieth-century, deaf students all across the United States had to fight for their right to use sign language. Nebraska is no exception as the 1911 state legislature passed a law banning the use of sign language in classrooms. The students and faculty of the Nebraska School for the Deaf actively resisted the legislation in an effort to sustain their linguistic and cultural freedoms. Because of its compelling history, History Nebraska is pleased to announce the Nebraska School for the Deaf campus is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Nebraska School for the Deaf ran from 1871 to 1998. Its twenty-acre campus consists of a collection of Mid-Century Modern and Collegiate Gothic buildings. The school's innovative vocational department made it a leader in deaf education. Vocational classrooms, as well as hallways, dormitories, and athletic facilities, were all spaces in which students and faculty actively resisted the ban on sign language until the repeal of the law in 1977.

"It was a great experience working on this nomination with the preparers. This campus and its story is an integral part of Nebraska's history," says David Calease from our [Historic Preservation Office](#). "It is the only school of this type in the State, bringing deaf students from all across the state together in one place. I think this helped unify and strengthen the Deaf community. On top of that, it's also a beautiful campus."

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's inventory of properties deemed worthy of preservation. It is part of a national program to coordinate and support local and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect the nation's historic and archeological resources. The National Register was developed to recognize historic places and their role in contributing to our country's heritage. Properties listed in the National Register either individually or as contributing to a historic district are eligible for State and Federal tax incentives.

For more information on the National Register program in Nebraska, contact the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office at History Nebraska at (402) 471-4775 or visit the [Historic Preservation page](#).

Water Screening Discoveries

<https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/water-screening-discoveries>



What's the first thing that pops into your head when you think of archeology? Was it washing piles of dirt through a screen? If not, let us tell you about water screening. It's one of the messier parts of discovering our history.

It's fairly easy to identify and pick out the large objects when excavating a site. But not all artifacts are big enough to be easily noticed right away. Water screening is for those smaller artifacts, allowing archeologists to find things that would otherwise go undiscovered.

Of course, not everything that comes up in the screen is important. Below, we have some roots and limestone that were screened from dirt excavated at our volunteer dig at Courthouse Rock in September.



But with persistence, attention to detail, and a decent amount of mud-stained clothes, the important things can come to light. Below, we have bone fragments and flakes from stone tool making, also screened from dirt excavated at our volunteer dig at Courthouse Rock in September.





This is only one small part of the work our archeologists do. If you want to learn more about their work to explore Nebraska's deep past, come see [our newest exhibit at the Nebraska History Museum!](https://nebraskahistory.org/exhibitions/our-newest-exhibit-at-the-nebraska-history-museum)